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ABSTRACT

Eight placement systems currently used in selected California community colleges are described in this paper. Following introductory comments on the variety and complexity of placement systems used in community colleges, issues related to English placement examinations are highlighted. Next, the eight placement models are described, focusing, with some variations, on faculty involvement, testing schedules, test format, the English courses in which students are placed, and particular issues brought to light by the unique characteristics of the placement systems. The models utilize standardized, college-developed, or teacher-developed instruments; employ multiple-choice tests and/or writing samples; and demonstrate a variety of levels of faculty participation. (LAL)

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PLACEMENT SYSTEMS FOR ENGLISH COURSES IN SELECTED CALIFORNIA COMMUNITY COLLEGES

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A Paper Presented at the Arizona English Teachers Association (AETA) and the Pacific Coast Regional Conference on English in the Two Year College (PCEC), November 6-7, 1981, Phoenix, Arizona

PLACEMENT SYSTEMS FOR ENGLISH COURSES

IN SELECTED

CALIFORNIA COMMUNITY COLLEGES

Community Colleges have been impacted with the large number of students who are not academically prepared in reading and writing. Colleges have reacted differently to this decline in skills. No Community College has a placement system for all students enrolled in different courses. The use of examinations is usually associated with exclusion which is contrary to the Community College philosophy of access. Some critics have criticized our system of access as the "revolving door" where we allow students to enter just to be sent out when they fail due to lack of placement devices. Students who want to enroll in an English composition course will most likely face an English Placement Examination though.

The use of placement examinations spread throughout the Community Colleges in the early 1970's. There are different systems of placing students in English composition courses. California with 106 Community Colleges must have that many systems! The focus of this paper will be on selected Community Colleges in California. There should be two examinations:

one for the regular English composition courses and another test for the limited English-speaking students. This paper will deal with the former.

The elements of an English Placement Examination are as follows:

1. Faculty's role in the development, assessment, and implementation of the examination.
2. Cost of examination, administration, and scoring.
3. Research on the validity and reliability of the examination.
4. Adherence to the standards for Fducational & Psychological Tests.*
5. Articulation with four-year institutions.
6. Identification of the unit responsible for remedial education on the campus.
7. Announcement of test schedule and how they are used.
8. Selection of the type of examination to be used, i.e., objective versus writing sample.

The rest of the paper will deal with specific systems that are currently being used in selected California Community Colleges. The description of the systems will provide an overview of the issues involved in English placement systems.

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*Prepared by a joint committee of the APA, AERA, NCME, the standards... are published by the American Psychological A.

USE OF STANDARDIZED INSTRUMENTS FOR PLACEMENT

A Southern California Community College administers the Test for Standard Written English to students who want to enroll in its College-level composition course. Scores are compared with those required by a nearby University's score for incoming freshman. If the student does not score at that level, s/he is required to take a remedial course.

The test dates are published in the Schedule of Classes and the Counseling Department administers the examination and scores it for the English faculty. Remedial instruction is not the responsibility of the English discipline at this campus.

This is a traditional system since it uses a standardized instrument and relies on a State University to determine the level of competency required of freshman students.

The test does not contain a writing sample. It is a 30-minute test containing 50 multiple choice questions. The examination can easily be administered and can also be self-scored. A validation study on the validity and/or reliability of the examination had not been conducted yet.

THE VENSAN MODEL

The VENSAN model is unique because it utilizes the faculty during the first week of instruction to read writing samples. The college publishes time slots for English courses. Students choose a time slot according to the published schedule. The student is directed to take an English examination during the first week of the semester. The exam is given to a large number

of students in a theater according to a schedule that is published in the Schedule of Classes. The faculty meets during the first week in one room and reads writing samples. Time spent reading the examinations is considered a work day for the faculty. The cost of the examination is the printing cost and a special secretary/clert that takes care of placing the list of students in the classes once the examinations are read. Students must return to the English Office to find out the English class in which they are allowed to enroll. Scheduling of all class levels at all time slots becomes a problem at times.

The time slot, i.e., the time in which the student registers to take the examination and return to obtain his/her placement is translated into an English class.

Two Community Colleges use this method of placement.

THE CAB MODEL OF PLACEMENT

Another unique method of dealing with students who are not able to do College level freshman composition is the placement of students in two tracks. CAB College uses a writing sample to determine if students belong in a basic English course or in freshman composition. The latter class has two levels.

Freshman composition is taught as one course; however, the more advanced students are given more complex assignments. Students do not know what type of credit they will get until

the end of the semester. A student who does not receive credit for the college level course has to continue to take the English course until s/he is able to do the assignments. The writing curriculum is coordinated with thirty hours (1 unit) of thirty-two individual lessons and excercises dealing with specific rules of grammar and usage. The instructor of the course may assign and require a student to enroll in one or more of the short courses offered by the College Writing Center. The courses offered are as follows:

Basic sentence writing

Writing tutorial

Spelling

The CAB model brings another perspective into the placement systems: The system of placement must be directly related to the instructional program of the College.

Students who cannot read or write at the college level do not have to be reminded of such a fact, what most students want is some direction as to where to begin to remedy their problems. Standardized tests perhaps fail at this point since they provide limited information to the instructor and the college.

THE FRES MODEL

Should students be required to take an examination if they cannot read at a certain level? Should an institution require students to perform at a certain level before giving them the opportunity of taking a placement examination?

This unique problem is addressed by a Community College in the California San Joaquin Valley. Students are given a placement examination for English and mathematics. The English test has two parts: objective section and a writing sample in the form of an essay. The objective portion of the test measures both reading and writing abilities. It is used as a first screening device. The College Testing Center administers the examination on a drop-in basis.

Students who score between the 20th--80th percentiles on the objective writing section of the test are eligible to take the writing sample. Students who score below the 20th percentile on both the reading (below 7th grade) and writing portions of the test are not eligible to take the writing sample and are counseled to enroll in a specific English course.

Those students who score above the 50th percentile on the objective reading portion and above the 80th percentile on the objective writing test are eligible to enroll in the college level course without taking the essay portion of the test.

The writing sample is given on selected dates to groups of students. The tests are read by two faculty members (full and part-time) at one sitting. Readers are paid for reading, and wholistic scoring is used. The readers periodically hold an "agreement session" to monitor standardization of essay evaluation.

Students are issued verification cards to register.

No card, no class. A student may take the examination each semester.

The FRES model brings more issues to light. Students are placed in classes if they score at a certain level without a writing sample; full and part-time faculty score the writing samples; verification of placement is provided by the Office of Admissions and Records, and training sessions are provived for those who did not place in the college level course.

If the school allows the repetition of the writing sample, how long should students wait for retake? Could they try two or three times until they score at the college level? What will the cost of such a policy be? However, if the test is truly valid, then retaking should not make a difference.

But, couldn't a Community College use a standardized instrument to place students in composition courses and then verify placement by administering a writing sample during the first week of instruction? Students who did not do well in the writing sample could then be routed to other classes.

THE SANA MODEL OF PLACEMENT

The SANA model provides us with a model where instructors administer a writing sample after the students have placed in their classes through a standardized instrument.

A school in the Los Angeles area uses the SCAT and the English COOP for placement purposes. A writing sample is used

to verify placement. At the end of the semester each instructor prepares a recommendation card and a print-out is prepared listing the level in which the student can register.

A special test for non-native English speakers is used. The college plans to change the test in the future.

The SANA model provides an option to students of taking the writing composition course on an open-entry basis. The modules are worth one unit. An instructional aide works 40 hours per week with the students and a clerk orients students and handles materials. A chart on the wall provides students with some idea of where they should be at a certain point in the semester. There is always a constant flow of students into the course.

The college has a higher attrition rates (60%) at their remedial level courses than at the college level course (less than 40%).

During the first week of school the faculty works in a conference room working on placement of students. No adds are taken and faculty members may transfer students from one level to another.

Could you place students on the basis of a reading test alone? A Community College in the San Francisco Bay Area uses the Davis Reading Test in the placement of students in English. The speed score is used as the basis for enrollment in the different courses, e.g., 57 or above for college level course and 43 or below for the lower level course.

DE MODEL OF PLACEMENT

Another approach in the placement of students is to use a reading and an objective multiple choice test in writing to place students. After initial placement, the faculty recommends the next level.

A Testing Office administers and scores an hour examination on English usage and sentence skills as well as a reading comprehension test. Student placement in English composition and basic reading courses is based on these test results. Students are allowed to take the examinations only once.

Students are provided with an I.B.M. card which indicates the test results and the appropiate courses in which to enroll. For the college-level English course, the scores required are as follows:

Reading	17+
Writing	42--59

Alternative tests are provided during each of the quarters for challenges to placement. Students who do not want to take placement tests can enroll in a reading or an English course designated for those students.

Who should be tested in English? Everyone? Only those who plan to enroll in an English course? Two Community Colleges require that students who take more than six units to take the English test. Should students be required to go on to the next level with a grade of "D" or "F"? The same Community College has a competency-based program in which it requires

80% or better achievement to go on to the next level.

MIRA O SYSTEM OF PLACEMENT

The English faculty prepared their own test. It is a reading and writing test. There are four courses: Two are the lowest and two are the "pre freshman" composition and grammar review.

Students are placed in each of the courses according to the results of a test. The examination is 50% essay and graded whollistically. There are six criteria used in the reading of the essay examination. The test is administered the week prior to registration and the first week of instruction.

The topic of the examination is changed every semester and the faculty selects the topic. A writing workshop is an integral part of the program with two hours of laboratory and three hours of lecture. There are two floating tutors, one certificated instructor, and two instructional aides in the classroom. An instructor is given three hours of released time to supervise the writing laboratories.

Finally, what about the students? How are they informed about the examination? What do the scores mean? Who checks the prerequisites?

THE HART SYSTEM OF PLACEMENT

The HART system has evolved since 1974. The faculty developed an information sheet that is given to all students

who take the examination. The information sheet lets students know about the examination, what it is, and how to obtain the scores. Through a system of checks by the faculty, students who do not take the test and have not taken an English course previously at the College are not allowed to remain in the class although they may already be registered.

The schedule of the examination is printed in the Schedule of Classes every semester. Students go directly to the test site on the date of the examination and take the test. Two faculty members read the essay examination wholistically and place students in three English composition courses. If faculty members do not agree on the placement, then a third reader is required. The faculty members get paid $20 per hour for reading examinations. For the most part, faculty members do not get paid by their "agreed rate of five examinations per hour."

A challenge to placement needs to be incorporated in any English Placement System. With HART a challenger is sent to the Counseling Center to determine if the student should be given another opportunity to write an essay. If the counselor recommends that another test administration is required, s/he recommends to the dean of humanities that the student be retested. This procedure has enabled the instructional area from becoming involved in counseling students who believe that they belong at a certain level because "they did good in high school."

An instructional aide is directly responsible for the administration of the examination. A subcommittee of the English faculty recommends the schedule, test questions, procedures, policies, and assessment procedures of the system to the faculty and the dean.

Each Community College Placement model addresses a unique problem or issue inherent to that campus. The process of establishing a system of placing students is complex. It is a process that never ends, requires constant feedback, and the support of all segments of the College.

Placement examinations are predominant in English composition courses. Only a few Community Colleges have become concerned with the lack of basic skills of students for other courses, e.g., social sciences, sciences, or occupational education. The "revolving door" will most likely continue on until the Community Colleges determine that the assessment and placement of students according to their academic skills will benefit the college and the students themselves.

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